

A Manual for Church Archivists

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ALTHOUGH some church archivists develop their own techniques through years of experience and never produce a written manual to guide them in their work, most archivists in charge of church records feel the need of a duplicated or printed guide not only for their own and their assistants' constant reference but also to insure the continuity of their work when others step into their positions.

Every denominational record collection has its unique features; thus it is impossible to produce a guide that will fit every situation in detail. Nevertheless church archives have enough in common to make it possible to suggest certain general procedures that can be followed in organizing any collection. The guide below has been followed by those in charge of the Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen College, Goshen, Ind., and is adapted to the needs of a small denomination. The system was organized largely by my colleague Nelson P. Springer.

BACKGROUND STUDY

A prerequisite for setting up a denominational archives program is a thorough knowledge of the administrative machinery of the church. The relationship of the various conferences, synods, presbyteries, or bishoprics, the congregations or parishes, and the boards and committees to each other and to the central administrative body must be thoroughly understood by the archivist. Furthermore, he must be familiar with the history of his church, for the administrative arrangements may have changed through the years. He must also have some knowledge of the key personalities, past or present, whose records he has or plans to obtain.

ARCHIVES HISTORY

With this background the archivist can then proceed to write a historical introduction covering the development of his own office

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or the agency created to handle the records of his church, as well as the duties, responsibilities, and limitations imposed upon the office. This should cover not only the history of the archival agency but should state its exact name, its relation to the board which created it and to which it is responsible, its place of operation, its purpose, its definition of the archival materials in which it is interested, the officers and duties of the archival staff, its source of finances, and the nature of its reports. The "Brief History and Plan of Administration of the Archives of the Church" can well be issued as a mimeographed bulletin for distribution to those interested.

DEFINING RECORD GROUPS

When archival materials are received by the archivist, he must make a basic decision before he can complete the accession of the gift. He must decide whether the gift consists of one record group, more than one record group, or an additional part of a record group previously received and accessioned. He must be clear as to what constitutes a record group and his manual should contain his definition, with illustrations and elaboration. In our definition we say that "a record group shall consist of records which stand as a distinct unit," and we explain that the considerations to guide the archivist in determining whether the collection is one or more than one record group are (a) the agency or individual creating the records, (b) the distinctiveness of activities reflected in the records, and (c) the time of deposit. These points need clarification before the archivist is sure of his decisions.

ACCESSIONING

The manual should contain a number of forms that could be used in transferring official or personal records to the archives. The help of a lawyer in formulating these letters of agreement may well be obtained. Suggested forms might include letters used to transfer records of an incorporated agency, those of an unincorporated agency, unrestricted private collections, and private collections with special restrictions. A form to be used in wills should be provided, as well as forms that could be used by an executor of the estate of a deceased person or by the heirs of a person who had formed a collection of records.

These forms should cover the date of transfer, the nature of the records, the ownership of the records both before and after the transferral, the restrictions, if any, regarding their use, and the name of the person making the transfer.

Records must be set up to show the arrangements on ownership as well as the source of each record group. A permanent accession record will show the source, the date of transfer, and the nature of each collection, as well as its quantity. There should be a letter file in which is placed a manila folder for each record group to hold all the correspondence and agreements relating to the accession. An accession sheet containing the basic information recorded in the permanent accession record should also be put in this folder, and a carbon copy of the sheet should go into the first box containing the record group material.

Because of the fact that additions to the archival holdings may be made more rapidly than they can be accessioned, it is necessary to have a preliminary registration book in which to record them. Shelves should be reserved for storing these additions until they are accessioned and placed in their proper positions on the regular shelves.

The manual will contain a page of instructions on accessioning materials. It will explain the accession folders, of which there will be one for each record group. The folder will contain all correspondence relating to the transfer of the gift and the restrictions, if any, on its use. As stated earlier, a form sheet summarizing this information as well as locating it in the record group by division and subdivision will also be placed in the folder and in the box where the materials are stored.

A master accession book is necessary. This provides one line for each new accession. The looseleaf accession books used by libraries can be adapted for archival use. The line should list the agency or person making the gift, a short title describing the gift, the number assigned to this particular record group, the date of the receipt of the gift, and the quantity of materials received. The quantity can be stated in terms of folders, boxes, or cubic or linear feet.

The record group number must be placed on each folder as well as on the box into which the materials are put at the time of accessioning and filing. The archivist must constantly be on guard lest a folder or item lose its identification marks and in consequence become lost or misplaced.

In accessioning materials by record group, account should be taken, as stated above, of the agency creating the records, and a place should be assigned on the shelves for each of these major agencies. As new agencies are created new numbers will be assigned them. It is better to wait until records are received to assign classi-

fication numbers rather than to work out a classification scheme in advance. In our case, our records to date fall under these nine categories: (1) Mennonite General Conference, (2) Mennonite District Conferences, (3) Local Congregations, (4) Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, (5) Mennonite Board of Education, (6) Mennonite Publication Board, (7) Miscellaneous Organizations, (8) Other Mennonite Branches, and (9) Inter-Mennonite Agencies. We have also a Historical Manuscripts Division, which contains personal collections of nonagency and noninstitutional materials. As new agencies are created, they can be numbered successively 10, 11, and so on indefinitely. Subdivisions are set up according to officers and committees of the agencies from whom the record groups are received and at the time the records are received. (Numbers 4, 5, and 6 do not appear as subdivisions of 1 because they are semiautonomous boards.)

RETENTION AND DISPOSAL POLICIES

If the archives is the official depository of a denomination, it is necessary for its governing body to determine what are its official records and what records its officers are required to preserve and what they may discard. It should also establish rules calling for the transfer of inactive records to its official depository. The Mennonite General Conference in its 1953 session adopted a set of policies covering these points. These policies not only guide the archivist in determining what records are to be collected and what may be discarded but guide church agencies in the formation of their records. This three-page policy statement is available from the writer for 25¢. The official policy statement on the retention and disposal of records becomes a part of the archivist's manual.

PREPARING FINDING AIDS

The principle to be followed in the production of finding aids is to work from the general to the particular. The first aids are general in character and only after these are produced are the detailed name, place, and topic guides prepared as demand for them arises. The first finding aid is the accession book, which names and briefly describes the record group at the time it is received. The second is the preliminary inventory, which describes each series in a record group by giving information on its origin; its chronological, geographical, or subject matter coverage; its relation to other records; and its quantity and arrangement. We have found it helpful to place some of this information on 3" x 5" cards, thus pro-

ducing inventory cards, which are then filed in an alphabetical card catalog.

After the inventorying is brought up to date it is possible to prepare a comprehensive general guide for the users of the archives. This will give them a view of the scope of the holdings as well as a clue as to whether a particular bit of information they desire may happen to be in the collection.

The last stage in the preparation of finding aids is the making of place, name, and topical indexes. Some of these steps, however, may go on simultaneously with the earlier ones. We have found that in accessioning and processing our materials we often discover certain information on persons, places, or topics that we might not rediscover for years to come if we did not immediately make an index card for it. One of the special finding aids that we have prepared is a card-file index to the letters written and received by John F. Funk, who as a pioneer publisher and editor of a church periodical for over half a century had a large correspondence with church leaders. The letters of other prominent churchmen will be indexed in a similar way. Another special index that we have prepared covers several hundred congregations about which we have informational records.

EQUIPMENT STANDARDS

The archives manual should set forth certain standards pertaining to equipment. Will flat or upright boxes be used for storing the holdings? What type of shelving will be used? Will special folders made of acid-free paper be used? Any policy regarding these matters should be recorded in the manual for the guidance of future purchasers of supplies. It is well to list the companies from which the original equipment was purchased in order to simplify the process of replacements or additions to the equipment.

If it is decided that a microfilm camera, a photocopy machine, or a laminator will be part of the equipment, a policy regarding the purpose and use of this equipment could well go into the manual. At this point in the manual there can also be an inventory of the archival equipment for insurance purposes.

REFERENCE SERVICE

The manual should have a sheet of instructions dealing with reference service and the rules for using the archives, copies of which can be handed to those wishing to use the materials in the archives. This should clarify the type of information for which the archivist is willing to search in answer to written inquiries, the form which

users of the archives must fill out concerning the nature and purposes of their research, and the rules for the use of materials in the archives, including a clear statement of restrictions on the use of special categories of records. If study carrels are available for those wishing to do extended research, the conditions under which a special desk is assigned to the researcher should be clarified.

The rules will also cover the conditions under which materials may be copied, and the regulations having to do with photographic or photostatic reproduction.

Finally there should be rules covering the publication of materials in the archives. The archivist must have authority to decide what may be published and under what conditions. Provision should be made for proper credit to the archives for any material published.

PUBLICITY

The manual should also clarify the type of report that the archivist must make regularly to the employing agency to which he is responsible. To facilitate the preparation of periodic reports, certain records must be kept. A visitor's record as well as a user's record should be called for in this part of the manual. There should also be a record of clues received from visitors and others concerning the whereabouts of manuscripts that might be obtained for the archives. Another record should list the number of letters calling for archival information and the number of telephone calls for information. The manual should prescribe regular reports on the number, amounts, and the nature of the gifts of materials received during a given period. There should also be a report on the number of new record groups and additions to former record groups accessioned during the year.

The manual should outline a program of publicity calling for a certain number of articles in newspapers and in church periodicals each year. It should also set a goal of field trips by the archivist for archival publicity and for the purpose of finding archival materials for his collection.

Providence

A hospitable Providence was the place of the Society's birth. May a kindly Providence bless and immortalize its career.

— A. R. Newsome, presidential address before the Society of American Archivists, June 18, 1937.